

PRESS RELEASE

February 14, 1990

Contact: Ann Edwards

BOURKE-WHITE: A Retrospective
February 28 - April 15, 1990

Perhaps the best-known woman photographer in the history of the medium, Margaret Bourke-White (1904-1971) won an international reputation as an industrial photographer and photojournalist at a time when such work was considered the exclusive domain of men. As a photographer for Life magazine, she covered some of the most momentous events and photographed some of the most important people of the 20th century. The risks she took to get the pictures she wanted--often working under dangerous conditions in factories or on the ledges of skyscrapers high above the city, photographing from the open doors of airplanes or under fire on the battlefield--made headlines and contributed to her fame.

BOURKE-WHITE: A Retrospective, an exhibition on view at The Cleveland Museum of Art from February 28 through April 15, 1990, traces the career of this talented and adventurous woman. The exhibition, organized and circulated by the International Center of Photography, is made possible by United Technologies with the cooperation of Life and Fortune. The Cleveland showing, the conclusion of its ten-city American tour, is supported by a grant from the Ohio Arts Council.

Photography critic and art historian Vicki Goldberg, author of Margaret Bourke-White, a Biography, is guest curator of the exhibition. She selected over 100 photographs covering three decades, ranging from Bourke-White's first efforts at photography in college to vintage prints of her industrial work, dramatic examples of her photojournalism, and aerial photographs of the American landscape from one of

her last photo-essays. While some of these images are well known, many have seldom or never been published.

Born in 1904 in New York City, Margaret Bourke-White was introduced to photography by her father, an engineer and inventor. She took her only formal course in photography with the Ohio-born pictorialist photographer Clarence H. White at Columbia University in 1922. In 1927 she graduated from Cornell University and joined her widowed mother in Cleveland, where she launched her career. She began photographing the estates of wealthy Clevelanders and the city's buildings, particularly the Terminal Tower, where she later had her studio, but soon focused her lenses on the steel mills and smokestacks of the city's industrial "Flats." (The Cleveland Museum of Art owns 17 of the photographs she took in Cleveland.) Like many other photographers and artists in the 1920s, such as Paul Strand and Charles Sheeler, she was discovering beauty in the simple, powerful forms of modern industry, which seemed to herald a new age of progress.

In her industrial photographs, as in all her later work, Bourke-White paid careful attention to design and composition. Strong contrasts, repeated forms, and dramatic light effects are hallmarks of her work. She photographed industrial plants, bridges, dams, and heavy machinery from angles that emphasize their monumentality. She also made close-up and tightly cropped views of machine parts and products that focus attention on the abstract beauty of these forms. Her experimental pictures of molten metal being poured inside the steel mills of Cleveland attracted the notice of Henry Luce, who in 1929 invited her to work for his new Fortune magazine. During her first year with the magazine she photographed industrial plants in Germany and Russia.

In 1936 Bourke-White joined the staff of Life, Luce's new picture magazine. Her cover story for the magazine's first issue (November, 1936) documented the engineering marvels of the Fort Peck Dam in Montana and life in the town that was

built to house the dam workers. The first "photographic essay," as Luce later called it, the format would become a prime mode of communication for American picture magazines for the next thirty years.

In the mid-1930s, the Depression and its effect on people began to claim her interest, which shifted from industry to social issues. In 1934 she had gone west to photograph Dust Bowl conditions and ended up recording the people. In 1937 she and the writer Erskine Caldwell (to whom she was later briefly married) collaborated on You Have Seen Their Faces, a study of rural poverty in the South that aroused the American conscience and pioneered a new book form in which photographs were as important as words.

In 1941, Life editors, sensing that the Germans were about to invade Russia, sent Bourke-White to Moscow. Three months after she arrived, the Germans bombed the city. The only foreign photographer on the scene, she recorded the bombardment of Moscow from the roof of her hotel near the Kremlin, using light from the flares dropped by the Germans. Before returning home, she was granted permission to photograph Stalin, a "scoop" for an American journalist.

By the early 1940s most photojournalists were using small 35mm cameras with faster lenses and films, which made it easier to take candid shots of fast-moving events in available light. But Margaret Bourke-White always preferred to work with large cameras, tripods, and auxiliary lighting because they gave her greater control of the final product and yielded a finer, more sharply detailed image.

In 1942 she asked Life for another overseas assignment. While crossing the Atlantic to North Africa, her transport ship was torpedoed and sunk. She and her fellow survivors were rescued after drifting all night in lifeboats. In North Africa, she flew on a bombing mission over the German-held Tunis airfield, the first in her profession allowed to fly into combat.

Covering the war, she followed the Allied armies in Italy, crossed the Rhine into Germany with American troops, and documented the devastation of German cities and the horrors of concentration camps. After the war, she went to India, where she photographed Gandhi a number of times; her last interview was hours before his assassination. She recorded the violence between Hindus and Moslems that accompanied India's struggle for independence and the great migrations of refugees uprooted by the partition of the country. In 1949 and 1950 she covered racial and labor unrest in South Africa in a brilliant photo-essay and in 1952 the terrors of guerilla warfare in Korea. In 1954 she was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease but continued to write and photograph until her illness incapacitated her.

Vicki Goldberg assesses Bourke-White's life and work in the fully illustrated catalogue of the exhibition, available at the Museum Bookstore (\$25 paper; \$45 hardback). On Wednesday, March 21, at 5:45 pm, Ms. Goldberg will offer a free public lecture on Bourke-White's photography in the context of her time, "Margaret Bourke-White: A Modern Photographer."

A 60-minute videotape, "Margaret Bourke-White: A Lady and Her Camera," and two nine-minute videotapes of rare film footage Bourke-White took in Russia in 1932 will be shown each day of the exhibition, from 10:30 to 11:30 am and Wednesday, from 7:30 to 8:30 pm.

Gallery talks will be presented in the exhibition on opening day, Wednesday, February 28; Sunday, March 4; Wednesday, April 11; and closing day, Sunday, April 15, at 1:30 pm. Museum staff will present slide lectures on Bourke-White's photography on two successive Wednesdays, March 7 and March 14, at 2:15 pm in the Museum Recital Hall. A sign language tour for the hearing impaired is scheduled on Saturday, March 17, at 10:30 am.

#

For additional information or photographs, please contact Ann Edwards, Public Information Office, The Cleveland Museum of Art, 11150 East Boulevard, Cleveland OH 44106; 216/421-7340.